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Feed the Future Country Fact Sheet

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Liberian Women's Co-op Increases Income and Food Security with Improved Storage Techniques



ACDI/VOCA

Participants from the Gbehlay Geh Rural Women Farmers' Multipurpose Cooperative Society (GRWFMCS) demonstrate new storage techniques with assistance from Farmer-to-Farmer field staff.

The Gbehlay Geh Rural Women Farmers' Multipurpose Cooperative Society (GRWFMCS) is a women-managed cooperative in east-central Liberia. The cooperative has 86 members, 81 of whom are women. Their members cultivate a variety of crops including vegetables, legumes, and rice. GRWFMCS manages a number of small enterprises led by women entrepreneurs, including a rice milling facility, an oil palm mill, and a recently established micro-financing institution.

For years, GRWFMCS farmers had been using traditional produce storage methods and, in the case of cowpeas and other legumes, farmers reused polyethylene-lined bags placed within woven polypropylene sacks. Because the bags were reused, they were often damaged, allowing both oxygen and cowpea weevils to enter and remain in the lining of the bags, re-infecting produce each season. The infestations grew rapidly and almost caused GRWFMCS to lose their stored crop completely. Most of the cooperative's women did not know what was damaging their legumes. When Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) field staff visited the women's farming co-operative in early 2014, GRWFMCS requested technical assistance through the F2F program in Liberia.

Managed by ACDI/VOCA, Farmer-to-Farmer is a knowledge-transfer program of the U.S. federal government supported by Feed the Future through USAID. The program is aligned with the objectives of Feed the Future, the US Government's global hunger and food security initiative, and works to support inclusive agriculture sector growth, facilitate private sector engagement in the agriculture sector, enhance development of local capacity, and promote climate-smart development. F2F provides technical assistance from U.S. volunteers to farmers, farm groups, agribusinesses, and other agriculture sector institutions in developing and transitional countries with the goal of promoting sustainable improvements in food security and agricultural processing, production, and marketing. The program leverages the expertise of volunteers from U.S. farms, universities, cooperatives, private agribusinesses, and nonprofit farm organizations to respond to the local needs of host-

country farmers and organizations. Volunteers, recruited from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, are generally individuals who have domestic careers, farms, and agribusinesses, or are retirees who want to participate in development efforts. As of today, F2F is active in over 30 countries worldwide.

In June 2014, F2F volunteer Carrie Teiken, a University of California, Davis PhD student in plant pathology and former Ghana Peace Corps volunteer, responded to GRWFMCS' request for a two-week training course on Bean Bug Management and Warehouse Storage in Karnplay, Nimba County, Liberia. Thirty-two GRWFMCS farmers, 84 percent of whom were women, attended the training and learned new storage mechanisms and post-harvest handling techniques to reduce cowpea weevil infestations. Carrie demonstrated the importance and use of airtight steel drums or Purdue Improved Cowpea Storage bags. She advised the farmers to harvest their pods as soon as they mature and to immediately dry them after harvest to reduce weevil infestations. She also taught them that seeds should be exposed to solar heat prior to drying to kill any weevils and eggs that come from the field. Her specifications noted that cowpeas should be properly dried to 10 percent moisture content before storage and should not be stored for more than six months.

At the end of the training, Carrie encouraged farmers to begin practicing integrated pest management field practices, such as crop rotation; field sanitation prior to planting; adding compost to improve plant nutrient content and soil structure; insect trapping and disease monitoring; the application of organic pesticides such as neem oil (a natural insecticide), soap, and/or garlic; weeding twice per growing season; and planting in rows instead of scattering the seeds on the ground.

Since Carrie's training, GRWFMCS farmers have put her recommendations into practice and reported a 20 percent reduction in cowpea post-harvest losses from the previous season, effectively increasing farmers' earnings and boosting crop yields for the local Liberian markets. "Carrie's training really helped us," said Annie Kruah, GRWFMCS chairwoman. "We are now getting profit from our cowpea farms." Thanks to Carrie's introduction of preservation techniques, there has been a 22 percent increase in co-op members growing cowpeas, and a third of the existing cowpea farmers have increased their cultivation areas from three to five acres. With Feed the Future support, the training and knowledge sharing made possible through the Farmer to Farmer program has encouraged the women to share these best practices with other farmers in their community, as well as new members of the women's cooperative.